

## WHO ARE YOU?

Advent 3 Year B: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
Psalm 126  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

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**Key Passage:** *Then [the Jews] said to [John], “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (John 1:22)*

One of the earliest stories in my life is a combination of memory and what others have told me. I was three years old when my family moved into graduate student housing. On Hallowe'en, I dressed in some costume that I don't remember and went with my father to the three other apartments that shared our stairwell. When the first door opened, I announced proudly, “I am Susan Gamble, and I have come for Hallowe'en.” No one had told me about the phrase “Trick or Treat.” That story survived in family lore and was often cited as the thing to say when you were at a loss for words: “Just tell them you are Susan Gamble and you have come for Hallowe'en!”

In today's Gospel we return to the character of John, called the baptizer in last week's account in Mark. In today's reading he is just a man whose name is John. The writer of the Fourth Gospel and John himself are very clear about who he is, though it has a curiously negative slant. The writer introduces John as one sent from God and says immediately that John is not the light, but he is to testify to the light.

Then John is accosted by representatives of the Jewish religious establishment who want to know who he is and what he is doing. We hear a string of No's and nots: John is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, he is not “the prophet.” When continually pressed, he quotes Isaiah, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” He claims his identity as a voice, one who testifies, and he offers baptism of water, in preparation for the one who is greater than he.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel uses the terms “witness” and testify” in giving John his identity. These are favorite words of this writer, occurring more than 30 times in various stories. (In contrast, the terms occur only twice in all of the three Synoptics.) The terms have legal connotations, and more significantly, the Greek word is *μαρτυρια*, from which we derive the word martyr. To be a witness is to risk consequences. It is a fitting term for John the baptizer.

To bear witness is to speak the truth as you have seen and experienced it. It a marker of who you are, of what you have seen and known. Testifying to the truth defines your identity.

Simone John, Trinity's Outreach Coordinator, has published her second book of poetry, entitled *testify*. A few weeks ago, I heard her speak in a program called "Invisible No More." Simone read several of her poems in which she incorporated the transcripts of women of color who experienced deadly confrontations with police officers. Their voices offered haunting testimonies of lives cut short. The connection between their identities as women of color with the terrible results of the incidents was inescapable.

"Who are you?" I am a voice crying in the wilderness.

We are reeling from other voices also telling their stories. #MeToo reveals a cascade of accounts of sexual harassment and abuse. Witnesses, long silenced by shame, powerlessness, and distrust of a system that will not stand up for them, are coming forward. Even as we see the ever-lengthening list of those speaking up, we know there are so many more who remain silent because they know they will not be protected from losing their jobs and reputations as hotel maids, domestic workers, health care assistants, waitresses, and others with no power.

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John is clear about who he is. He refuses the expectations thrust upon him. He derives his identity from his Jewish tradition, but he seems to redefine it. He slips away from easy identification of role and the potential power and adulation that might come from such association. He is not Elijah or the Messiah. He points away from himself, toward Jesus. But he is not some timid or self-effacing character. He is serious about his role and diligent in pursuing it. He is not cowed by the questions of religious authorities, nor will he be intimidated later by the murderous powers of Herod.

"Who are you?" It's a complicated question. Our identities are shaped by so many factors. We spend a lifetime putting together answers to that question. Some seem fundamental, but many shift and change over time. Perhaps you have taken the Myers Briggs Personality test. You answer a series of questions that reveal patterns of how you interact with others, how you like to make decisions, how you give weight to feelings and judgments. I have taken that test at least three times over the years. While some of the overall patterns have remained constant, there have been several swings within those patterns. We are not fixed identities; we change and adapt to circumstances around us.

Other markers of my identity have shifted. For the first fifteen years of married life, my husband and I struggled to conceive a child. We thought of ourselves

as parents, but it was not to be. For thirty-four years I was a wife; then I became a widow. When I entered seminary, I decided to use my middle name, Rainey, rather than my first name, Susan. As in the Bible, I felt I was being given a new life and I would signify it with a new name. I have been privileged to be one of your priests for over five years; you have embraced me and welcomed me into your lives. “I am Rainey Dankel, and I have come for Advent.” Now as I approach retirement, I am thinking about what new shape my identity will have.

What do we hold onto through a lifetime of changing expectations, confusions, twists and turns? John’s mission is clear: he testifies to the light. And we who wish to follow Jesus are called to do the same. We are called to look for the light and to point to it. We don’t have to create the light ourselves; we are to search it out. That is certainly the spirit of Advent: watching and waiting. Not being so weighed down by our own failures and the darkness of the world around us that we miss God’s light. On the other hand, not being so sure of our own brilliance and success that we cannot see the true light of God.

Where do you see God at work? In your own heart, in the lives of those whom you love, in the places you work and play, in the world around us? Clearly, there is much darkness. The seven-part series in the *Boston Globe* has analyzed the history and evidence of racism in Boston, rearing its ugly head in so many parts of our public and private lives. Looking to possible solutions in the last article is an exercise in peering into the darkness for signs of light. It is a time of hopeful expectation. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

That is the task of Advent, to face squarely into the darkness with the confidence of those who claim God’s promise never to leave us or desert us. We are voices crying in the wilderness, not whistling in the dark out of denial or false optimism. But a people who believe the testimony of our ancestors, who trust the shaky experiences of our own hearts, and who lean onto each other and into the darkness as a way of preparing ourselves to receive the precious gift of light.

“Who are you and what do you say about yourself?” The question of our individual identities is bound up in the question of our identity as a community. The people of Israel knew themselves to be a people living in covenant with God. At Trinity Church we are asking ourselves about our identity as we prepare a profile and look for a new rector. We are testifying to the light we have seen and peering into the darkness for signs of new light. We look for the future to which God calls us.

And who are we? Our first reading from Isaiah gives us some suggestive images. Written as encouragement to a devastated people returning from exile, the prophet offers a vision of God’s continuing desire to build a beloved

community. As we fill out surveys and engage in circles of conversation, the prophet reminds us that we are not alone in the darkness. God is at work. Let's claim these promises for ourselves. Let's read these words as part of our testimony.

(Please open your pew Bible to page \_\_\_\_\_. We are going to read together Isaiah 61 verses 1-4 and 8-11.)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup>to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. <sup>4</sup>They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ....

<sup>8</sup>For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. <sup>9</sup>Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

<sup>10</sup>I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.